



Loom and Spindle: Or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls. With a Sketch of "The Lowell Offering" and Some of Its Contributors (1898)

Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson

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Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson (1825 – 1911), who worked as a bobbin doffer in a Massachusetts cotton mill as a child, was involved in a worker's strike, became a poet and author and played an important role in the women's suffrage movement in the United States.

Somebody has said that the story of any life, properly written, would make an entertaining book. In "Loom and Spindle" Mrs. Robinson has sketched her own biography, and it is more than ordinarily interesting, because her experience has been more than ordinary. Born in Boston, she went with her mother, when she was still a child, to Lowell, where, at the age of ten, she began work as a "doffer" in a cotton mill. Her account of life among the mill-girls of Lowell sixty years ago is exceedingly interesting. In 1831 Lowell was little more than a factory village, and the operatives were mostly New England country girls, of good families, who took quick advantage of an opportunity offered them – an unusual thing for women in those days — to work for money. The high intellectual attainments of these girls were shown in their publication of the Lowell Offering, the historic mill-girls' magazine, for which Mrs. Robinson wrote, and to which she devotes a considerable portion of her book. Her biographical sketches of the most important of the mill-girl writers, including Lucy Larcom and her sister, have much historical and literary value.


Mrs. Robinson was a mill girl at Lowell in the days when the "Lowell Offering" brought to the notice of the world the intellectual activities of a group of young women connected with those great manufacturing corporations. Mrs. Robinson pictures the almost idyllic state of the working girl at that time, and she contrasts their mental and social status with the same class of workers at the present time.

The "Mill Girls" were female workers who came to work for the textile corporations in Lowell, Massachusetts, during the Industrial Revolution in the United States. The workers initially recruited by the corporations were daughters of propertied New England farmers, between the ages of 15 and 30. (There also could be "little girls" who worked there about the age of 13.) By 1840, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, the textile mills had recruited over 8,000 women, who came to make up nearly seventy-five percent of the mill workforce.

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Originally published in 1898; reformatted for the Kindle; may contain occasional imperfection; original spellings have been kept in place.

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